

Voices from the Field: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations for Improving Rhode Island's Early Care and Education System

Background and Process

Between May and September 2009, Rhode Island Kids Count hosted three open, ad hoc meetings on early care and education with Rhode Island providers and advocates. The meetings were open to all interested parties and intended to give participants an opportunity to share information on the current priorities, challenges and opportunities in early care and education in Rhode Island. Staff from a few state agencies attended some of the meetings to listen, observe and share information.

To ensure that all participants would have a shared understanding of the components of Rhode Island's early care and education system, the first meeting included an overview of each component (child care, Head Start, Pre-K and Early Childhood Special Education) followed by discussion and input from participants on the current challenges, opportunities and priorities in each area. During the second and third meeting, participants worked to clarify key issues, articulate the impact of the issue on children, families and providers, and generated ideas for addressing the issue(s). The following document provides a brief summary of the key priorities that emerged from the discussion. Please note that a range of opinions and ideas were expressed during these meetings – this document attempts to articulate the common themes. For more detail on meeting discussions, please see the meeting minutes.

Key Priorities

Priority #1: Create a coordinated professional development system

Issue: Several positive steps have been taken to strengthen professional development and quality efforts in Rhode Island including the creation of BrightStars, a premier quality rating and improvement system, planning to establish TEACH¹ and efforts by key training providers to ensure that their courses articulate with higher education programs. Those initiatives represent an important step toward elevating and professionalizing the field of early childhood education and ensuring that staff is paid competitively. However, there was strong agreement that these initiatives and other professional development activities need to be brought together under a coordinated system of professional development for early care and education providers. Child care providers in Rhode Island work with two systems for professional development that work in opposition (clock hours vs. college credit hours). DCYF licensing requirements are focused on providers receiving a certain amount of “clock hours” of training per year. There are not

¹ TEACH (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) will provide scholarships to child care workers to complete coursework in early childhood education and to increase their compensation.

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a lot of requirements about the content or quality of these clock hours, but providers must have documentation of these hours. At the same time, RIDE's new proposed preschool standards, federal Head Start Performance Standards, BrightStars benchmarks, and NAEYC accreditation standards are pushing providers to pursue college degrees (AA and BA degrees) and to get college credits in specific fields. In addition, professional development (PD) providers are not required to align their training with common standards or to clearly connect their courses to professional certifications and degrees. This affects program and staff quality and makes it difficult for full-time working staff to build towards higher credentials.

Finally, participants were concerned that increasing credentialing and quality standards and the increased compensation required to attract and retain staff with higher credentials would be financially unfeasible, especially in light of the increased economic pressures and reductions in child care subsidies.²

Recommended Next Steps: Participants strongly recommended that state leaders from multiple agencies come together with institutions of higher education and PD providers to develop a plan for building a well resourced, comprehensive professional development system and work closely with higher education to create appropriate degree pathways that accommodate the needs of full-time, experienced workers. According to Sharon Lynn Kagan, "A comprehensive professional development system builds the infrastructure necessary to ensure that all early care and education teachers have access to an integrated system of professional development that links training and formal education, addresses the content and quality of training through a quality approval process, provides incentives (including compensation) for training, and offers training passports or career registries that chronicle the cumulative training and education individuals receive. Ideal professional development systems embrace diverse early care and education sectors (e.g. child care, prekindergarten and Head Start) to streamline expectations and opportunities for all early care

² Standards for teacher qualification are increasing on many fronts. For example, to achieve the highest quality level, the state's new quality rating system, BrightStars, requires that at least 50% of Pre-K teachers in a center hold a BA in Early Childhood Education and that family child care providers have an Associates degree and at least 18 hours of college credits in early childhood education or a related field. In addition, similar regulations are pending from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) for a program to be approved by RIDE as a pre-school. And starting in 2011 all Head Start lead classroom teachers must have an associate's degree by 2011 and 50% must have a bachelor's degree by 2013.

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and education teachers and directors” (S.L. Kagan, K. Kauerz, and K. Tarrant *The Early Care and Education Teaching Workforce at the Fulcrum*, 2008, Teachers College Press).

Specific recommendations include:

- Review the original framework for the Starting Right Professional Development Committee and integrate it with recent recommendations from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Child Care Information Center to identify specific elements needed for a comprehensive professional development system in Rhode Island. These elements should be officially adopted and implemented.
- Complete the work needed to finalize core competencies which define what providers should know and be able to do. Outline core competencies for all types of providers and ages of children so that trainings and courses can be designed to foster these competencies in professionals. Expedite this process by looking at other states’ core competencies and adopting those with minor revisions or consider adopting the core competencies developed nationally for the CDA.
- Design courses (integrated with higher education system) that will build these competencies in providers. Offer the courses regularly and improve them over time. Use the RI Early Learning Standards trainings as a model. Consider adopting or purchasing courses that have been developed by others (e.g. Charts-A-Course, Maine Roads to Quality, Ready to Learn Providence, Wheelock, etc.)
- Build a group of trainers that are approved to offer these courses. Support and monitor the work of these trainers to ensure they are effective.
- Include higher education at the table from the beginning so that community-based courses fit into the higher education system and providers who take these classes can receive college credit.
- Look at CCRI’s Portfolio Class system to see how pathways could be developed for experienced providers to get college credit for prior learning and on-the-job experience.
- Work with colleges to see if “core” classes for majors can be delivered in the community by approved instructors so that providers have more access to “core” classes.

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- Bring together the three institutions of higher education (RIC, URI, and CCRI) to work on coordination and articulation issues. Address divisions within colleges – e.g. human service department vs. education department. Some community based courses are accepted by only certain departments within a college/university.
- Work with RIDE to review and revise the requirements for the Early Childhood Teaching certificate.

Priority #2: Centralize the state coordination of the system

Issue: Currently, various components of the early care and education system are managed by several different state agencies including the Department of Human Services, Department of Children, Youth and Families, the Rhode Island Department of Education, and the Department of Health. Decentralized governance and management of the early childhood system (including funding, licensing, quality monitoring, and professional development) creates silos and makes it very difficult to establish a system that shares common standards and provides strong quality monitoring. It also makes it more difficult to secure and leverage funding at the state and federal level. Participants feel that it is critical that Rhode Island develop a more coherent system of oversight, support and monitoring for the early childhood system as a whole.

Recommended Next Steps: An ideal end goal would be the creation of an Office of Early Learning similar to how the Office of Adult Education integrates and coordinates adult education and training efforts across multiple state agencies.³ However, participants felt that coordination could be significantly improved by creating a unified, online portal with centralized access to important information for providers, parents and families. This would be an effective use of resources and would minimize the frustration of trying to access information across multiple departments.

Coordination could also be greatly supported by the creation of a statewide table and the development of a statewide plan for early care and education.

³ Currently, there are four states, including Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Washington that have consolidated key functions into one department. Key state government functions that are often consolidated into one department are: child care subsidy management, child care licensing, state Pre-K management, preschool licensing, Head Start collaboration office, and early childhood special education.

Priority #3: Improve Access for Kids and Families

Issue: The myth persists among some people that child care is considered to be babysitting versus an educational experience. Child care is seen as something that parents need while they are working rather than something that can significantly influence child development, school performance and the preparation of tomorrow's workforce. Yet there is now strong research showing that high quality early care and education (birth – five years old) is a very effective economic development investment, particularly for low income children. In fact, parents that can afford it are increasingly enrolling their children in high quality early care and education programs regardless of whether they are working because they recognize the benefit for their children. Economic realities prevent lower income families from doing the same. As long as eligibility for subsidies is tied to parents work status, rather than seen as an investment in children, consistent access to high quality early care and education for children from lower income families will remain tenuous. While this is a topic of national concern, participants feel that it is important to more effectively educate Rhode Island parents and policy makers about how early care and education centers impact child outcomes and re-frame the language and branding of child care so that it is more focused on words that communicate learning such as “early learning centers” or “education”.

Recommended Next Steps: Create a diverse stakeholder group to align the industry (providers, parents, regulatory agencies, business owners, interested parties such as future parents or college students, and government officials) and develop a communications effort that would:

1. Make a case for the educational and economic importance of early care and education.
2. Educate people on the learning outcomes of play and children in early learning programs.
3. Promote early learning as an investment in a child's future much like college is promoted.
4. Educate parents and policy makers on the components of a high quality program.
5. Change the industry language.

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List of Participants

First	Last	Organization
Chris	Amirault	Brown/Fox Point Early Childhood Education Center
Leanne	Barrett	RI KIDS COUNT
Karen	Bouchard	Woonsocket Head Start and Day
Charlotte	Boudreau	Connecting for Children and Families
Elizabeth	Burke Bryant	RI KIDS COUNT
Tammy	Camillo	RI Association for the Education of Young Children
Barbara	Cavallaro	Pawtucket Day Child Dev. Center
Tracy	Cheney	Dr. Day Care Family
Jody	Cloutier	Tri-Town Community Action Head Start
Sue	Connor	RI Association for the Education of Young Children
Missy	Deitrick	Beautiful Beginnings
Susan	Dickstein	Bradley Early Childhood/Brown
Rachel	Flum	Poverty Institute
Sharon	Friedman	Heritage Park YMCA
Leslie	Gell	Ready to Learn Providence
Kristen	Lehoullier	Independent Facilitator
Khadija	Lewis Khan	Beautiful Beginnings
Jessica	Mack	RI KIDS COUNT
Carol	Mahoney	YMCA of Greater Providence
Kim	Maine	Sunshine Child Development Center
Laura	Mason Zeisler	Explorations Unlimited
Deb	Meiklejohn	RI Parent Information Network
Deborah	Morelle	URI Providence
Sharon	Moylan	Options For Working Families
Stacy	Murak	East Bay Community Action Head Start- Newport
Kathie	Sandberg	The Children's Workshop
Deb	Tanny	Connecting for Children & Families
Lynne	Trudel	CCRI-RI Early Ed & Training Program
Andrea	Underwood	LISC/RI Child Care Facilities Fund
Amy	Vogel	Dr. Day Care Family
Sue	Warford	URI

